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THE SOCIETY OF ST. VINCENT DE PAUL AS AN AGENCY OF RECONSTRUCTION¹

Seventy-five years ago on the 20th day of November, there assembled in the school-room of the Old Cathedral Church a little gathering of noble-hearted men, and there, under the guidance of the saintly Father Ambrose Heim, "the priest of the poor," founded the first Conference of the St. Vincent de Paul Society in America. None of that little band linger to join us in our thanksgiving today, yet their names we have and their spirit lives on. Beneath a simple pledge to the principles of St. Vincent de Paul written on the title page of the minutes of the first meetings, we find the signatures of more than a hundred prominent Catholic men, who promised their time and money to the relief of the poor. Surely their names should be remembered and their deeds recorded; yet it was not the applause of men they sought.

The above is quoted from the *Year-Book of the Old Cathedral* of St. Louis for 1920, issued from the press just a few weeks ago; it purported to be no more than a mere announcement of the Diamond Jubilee celebration to be held at the venerable edifice on Thanksgiving Day (November 25). But I cannot forbear regarding that day as of more than local significance, for the Diamond Jubilee of the Society in St. Louis was in very truth the Diamond Jubilee of the Society in the United States.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul is an association of Catholic laymen—young men, had we perhaps better say with the Rules—banded together for their mutual edification and sanctification and the performance of meritorious charitable acts of personal service in behalf of the poor.

It dates its origin back to early in May, 1833, when eight enthusiastic and zealous young men assembled in the little print-

¹ Principal works consulted: *Manual of the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul*, Eng. Edit.; KATHLEEN O'MEARA: *Frederic Ozanam, His Life and Works*, New York, n. d.; *Proceedings of the National Conference of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul held in Boston, Mass., 1911*, Boston, 1911; *History of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in St. Louis, Mo.*, Carondelet, Mo., 1861. Statistical details and information concerning the present mode of administration of the Society in America were kindly furnished by Mr. Edmond J. Butler, Secretary of the Superior Council of the United States, whom the writer is glad to thank for the prompt and gracious attention given to his queries.

ing office of *La Tribune Catholique*, 7 Rue du Petit Bourbon St. Sulpice, in Paris, to formulate plans for the service of God in the persons of the poor. All were students at the University; they hailed from various places and were quite strangers to one another a few months before, but ere long, among their hundreds of companions had found each other out. All were staunch Catholics, so much so as to publicly champion even in the University halls the Church's cause against the scoffs and taunts of anti-Christian professors. Apologetic purposes first banded them together into a kind of debating club—a Conference they called it, as each weekly meeting opened with a lecture (Conférence, in French) by the Editor of the *Tribune Catholique*, Mr. Bailly. But soon Frederic Ozanam was haunted by the idea that deeds are mightier arguments than words.

How this idea came to take possession of his mind is not hard to realize. France then, to be true, was on the whole a fairly good country to live in. Although engaged in her punitive expedition against Algiers, she was at peace with her neighbors. Moreover, in less than fifteen years after the fall of Napoleon, the wise administration of a skilful minister of finances had completely extinguished the staggering public debt bequeathed by the preceding régime—a feat worthy of the study and meditations of every present-day government. The kingdom was, therefore, in an enviable situation of prosperity. Yet public prosperity, desirable as it is, is no panacea for all social ills; it could not heal all the deep, malignant, festered wounds inflicted by the Revolution and the Napoleonic age. Already the great cities were attracting swarms of so-called fortune seekers, so many of whom were doomed to utter failure and went to swell the numbers of the social wrecks. Now where *Beati possidentes* is the watchword, hearts are straitened so that there is little place in them for pity, and still less for charity towards them that have been rejected in Fortune's blind selection. These, if Christian faith and hope have ceased to illumine their souls, "being hungry, shall curse their king," says the prophet—we might as well translate: shall curse society—"and their God; and they shall look to the heavens above, and to the earth beneath, and behold trouble and darkness, gloom and anguish." ²

² Is., viii, 21, 22.

Ill fares the land to evil ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates and men decay.

Of many of these victims of the struggle for existence, at the period I am speaking of, the souls had been weaned by the Revolution from the sweets of Christian faith and hope; to them the Church, risen again from the ashes of the Terror, was but the symbol of the despised and hated old régime. True, Louis XVIII had inserted in the Charter a clause constituting France Catholic; but you cannot make converts and believers by law. Voltaire was the oracle; his works, no less than twelve editions of which were brought forth and exhausted during the first seven years of the Restoration, was Law, Prophets and Gospel to intellectual *bourgeois*, and through them to the masses, ever anxious to envy, emulate and ape higher classes, and just now an excellent culture for St. Simonianism, Fourierism and all other social quackeries of the day.

If there was ever need of reconstruction, therefore, it was at that period of wholesale poisoning of the minds, development of industrialism and exodus from the country, with their train of poverty and destitution. With their characteristic boldness, St. Simonianism and Fourierism "were up and doing." Their reconstruction work, heralded as an infallible means of procuring universal happiness, was, to be sure, built upon unsteady and ruinous philosophic foundations and along lines running counter the laws of human nature; still it was work, no idle lecture-hall talk. This was the fact which forcibly seized upon Ozanam's mind. Was not the Church in possession of a sound social doctrine, of a program of action? Why then should the one and the other remain inoperative, when inaction lent semblance of truth to the insidious assertion that the Church, once the great, the only agency of social reform, was now standing aloof, and conniving, at least by her unconcern, at the ills and abuses rampant in society? She, too, must "be up and doing." But her natural leaders, the clergy, as salaried officials of a bourgeois government, and spokesmen of an antiquated institution identified in popular estimation with the old régime, were held in discredit and suspicion. It devolved upon the laity, therefore, to show her works.

This conviction it was which brought about, in May, 1833, the meeting which I mentioned above. And *le Père Bailly*, as

the affectionate familiarity of his young friends nicknamed the old Editor, struck at once the keynote when he warned them: "If you intend your work to be really efficacious, if you are in earnest about serving the poor as well as yourselves, you must not let it be a mere doling out of alms, bringing each your pittance of money or food; you must make it a medium of moral assistance, you must give them the alms of good advice (*l'aumône de la direction*).” And again: “A portion of the very greatest misery of the poor often proceeds from their not knowing how to help themselves out of a difficulty once they have got into it. Most of you are studying law; some medicine, etc.; go and help the poor, each in your special line; let your studies be of use to others as well as to yourselves; it is a good and easy way of commencing your apostolate as Christians in the world.”

For further directions, which only a trained worker with a long experience in the service of the poor could impart, Mr. Bailly sent his young friends to a Sister of Charity, Sister Rosalie,³ the “Queen of the Faubourg St. Marceau.”⁴ If Ozanam was the father of the nascent Society—although he always disclaimed the title of founder—Sister Rosalie deserves to be saluted its godmother. Not only did she welcome her zealous visitors with all the warmth of her big, motherly heart, and give them the advice they were seeking; but she drew up the list of families to attend, and supplied the first bread and soup and fuel tickets; nay, more, she saw to it that a Conference was established at once in her parish.

Each member had now a family to look after. Every week the Conference met, opening and closing with prayer; there each member reported his experiences, the wants of those under his care; ways and means to relieve these wants were discussed; and at the end a leather bag was passed around into which each one dropped whatever money he could dispose of to pay for the tickets. Thus, under the patronage of St. Vincent de Paul, unknown to the noisy world, was launched the Society, true tiny

³ A biographical sketch and appreciation of Sister Rosalie and her work was written by KATHLEEN O'MEARA under the title “Queen by Right Divine,” in *A Heroine of Charity and Queen by Right Divine*. London, n. d.

⁴ The Faubourg St. Marceau was at that time on the outskirts of Paris (southeast) and of civilization: a maze of dark, crooked and filthy streets lined with hovels where lived in great numbers the poor, the outcast and the scum of the population of Paris.

grain of mustard-seed destined to become a large and fruitful tree in the garden of the Church.

May I be permitted here to wander afield a little in pursuit of history's strange footprints? The origin of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the name of Conference which it cherishes as a pious heritage, its simple and elastic rules, the variety of its works, all these throw my mind most forcibly two centuries back, to some day in March, 1630. On that day, Henry de Levis, Duke of Ventadour, in his Paris mansion, Rue du Petit Bourbon St. Sulpice, gathered around him seven companions and organized that Company of the Blessed Sacrament⁵ concerning which so much has come to light during these last fifteen years. The coincidences are remarkable: the same quiet street, Rue du Petit Bourbon St. Sulpice, saw the cradle of both associations; both commenced with the same number of members, eight; both agreed to hold weekly meetings, and called these meetings by the same name of Conferences. The Company of the Blessed Sacrament "acknowledged neither bonds, measures nor restrictions, save such as prudence and discernment must assign in employments." It was formed to "work not only for the relief of the poor, the sick, the prisoners, the afflicted of every description, but also for the conversion of heretics and the propagation of the faith; it was to exert itself in preventing scandals, godlessness, blasphemy, in forestalling all evils and remedying them, promoting general and particular good, and was expected to take a hand in every difficult, hard and neglected work of relief." On reading this program, one is almost tempted to regard it as the first draft of the rules of the nineteenth century Conferences. And just as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul was brought into existence by the needs of the French society in 1830, so was the seventeenth century Company instituted to cope with the distressing conditions created by half a century of wars of Religion, and intensified after the death of Henry IV by

⁵ The discovery by Father P. Le Lasseur, in 1865, at the Paris Bibliothèque Nationale, of Count de Voyer d'Argenson's Memorandum to Cardinal de Noailles, and its publication, in 1900, by Dom H. Beauchet-Filleau, under the title *Annales de la Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement*, have given rise to quite an extensive literature, in which the Company appears sometimes under its true name, at other times under the doubtfully appropriate name of *Cabale des Dévots*.

the devastations caused in northern and northeastern France by the then waging Thirty Years War.

More than once have I heard an expression of wonderment that St. Vincent de Paul, the founder and organizer of so many works of charity, never thought of instituting a counterpart for men of his admirable Confraternities of Ladies of Charity, something like the Conferences. St. Vincent had a golden maxim, never to outrun Divine Providence. When circumstances demanded the enlistment of the ladies for works of charity, the Confraternities of Charity were instituted. But when, later on, circumstances demanded likewise the enlistment of men for the same purpose, the Duke of Ventadour, having taken the lead, St. Vincent was satisfied to follow and simply to lend his aid, for he—and so was Mr. Olier, and so was Bossuet—was a member of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament.⁶

But then what of Ozanam? Was his foundation sheer plagiarism of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament? By no means. No disparagement can attach to Ozanam's erudition and scholarship if we asseverate he never heard of that Company, which, indeed, having put secrecy in its rules, has remained quite unknown until recent years. That there is between the two institutions an undeniable family likeness is not to be wondered at, since both are the offspring of the same spirit of Catholic faith and zeal moving kindred souls to cope with analogous social ills. It is a commonplace that history is wont to repeat itself.

Revenons à nos moutons. Ozanam and his companions had made their own St. Vincent de Paul's maxim: "Good makes no noise; nor does noise do any good." Much, however, as they shunned notoriety, their charitable activities could not long remain in hiding; and once known, were not spared the taunts and ridicule of the philanthropists and social workers of the day. "What do you hope to do?" said a St. Simonian leader one day to Ozanam. "You are only eight poor young fellows, and you expect to relieve the miseries that swarm in a city like Paris? Why, if you counted any number of members, you could do but comparatively nothing. We, on the contrary, are elaborating ideas and a new system which will reform the world and banish

⁶ Cf. *St. Vincent de Paul et la Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement*, in *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique*, published by the Catholic Institute of Toulouse, France, October, 1917, pp. 353-369.

misery from it altogether. We shall do for humanity in a moment what you could not accomplish in several centuries." Despite criticisms, and sure of the soundness of their basic principle, that if you want to do good to society, you must begin by taking it as it is, and not as you would like it to be, and still less turn it topsy-turvy, the little band labored on patiently and zealously. During the summer vacation of 1834, Ozanam could write to a friend:⁷

Since we have been in existence, we have distributed about two thousand four hundred francs, some books and a pretty good quantity of old clothes. Our resources consist in the collection we make every Tuesday, the alms of some charitable persons who come to the rescue of our good will, and our castoff clothes. As it is possible that at the beginning of the new scholastic year our numbers will be increased to a hundred, we shall be obliged to divide, and split into several sections, which will all periodically hold a common meeting.

And a little later, from Paris, speaking to the same friend of a Report on the work accomplished, which he had promised to send and could not locate, he good-humoredly remarks:⁸

It is no great misfortune; there was perhaps a germ of pride in this written résumé of our work, and God, who forbids our left hand to know what our right hand does, may have allowed us to lose a title-deed whose only use was to gratify a foolish vanity. Charity should never look back, but always forward, for the number of her past benefits is always very small, while the present and future wants that she has to relieve are infinite. Look at the philanthropical societies, with their meetings, reports, summings-up, bills and accounts; before they are a year old they have volumes of minutes and so forth. Philanthropy is a vain woman who likes to deck herself out in her good works and admire herself in the glass; whereas charity is a mother whose eyes rest lovingly on the child at her breast, who has no thought of self, but forgets her beauty in her love. . . .

Are we not, like the Christians of those early times, thrown into the midst of a corrupt civilization and a society that is falling to pieces? Cast your eyes on the world around you. The rich and the happy ones, are they much better than those who made answer to St. Paul, "We will hear you another time"? And the poor and the people, are they much more enlightened and better off than those to whom the Apostles first preached the Gospel? Equal evils, therefore, demand an equal remedy; the world has grown cold, and it is for us Christians to rekindle the vital fire. . . . Humanity in our times is

⁷ KATHLEEN O'MEARA: *Life and Works of Frederic Ozanam*, p. 84.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 84-85.

very much like the traveller in the Gospel: While journeying along the road traced out for it by Christ, it was seized upon by robbers, by wicked men, who despoiled it of all it possessed, the treasure of faith and love, and left it naked and moaning, lying by the wayside. The priests and the levites passed, and this time, as they were true priests and levites, they drew nigh to the sufferer whom they fain would have healed, but in his delirium he did not recognize them and thrust them from him.

Let us in our turn, poor Samaritans that we are, weak and of little faith, draw near to the wounded man. Perhaps he will not take fright at us, being only what we are, but will let us try to probe his wounds and pour balm into them; let us breathe words of consolation and peace into his ear, and then, when his eyes are opened, we will place him in the hands of those whom God has constituted the guardians and physicians of souls, and who are, so to speak, our hosts on the road of our pilgrimage here below, since they feed our famished spirits with the word of life and the promise of a better world. This is the task that is before us, this is the divine vocation to which Providence calls us.

No words could better describe the spirit of the Society and of its founders. Men animated with such a spirit must radiate it, and attract to their ranks all Catholic men of good will. Indeed, despite opposition, even that of well-meaning persons—what good work has not met with such opposition?—membership grew apace; a year had not elapsed since the writing of the above quoted letter, when it was found necessary to divide into sections or groups according to geographical lines, and to frame and adopt rules under which the Society was to live.

Nothing can be more simple than these Rules, or more economical than the Society's administration. There is not a single paid official; indeed not only do the men serve without compensation, but they are expected to contribute their share to the weekly collections whereby the treasury of the Conference is fed. One hundred per cent, therefore, of the funds collected for the poor always goes to the poor. One cannot refrain from contrasting this unique achievement and model of perfect efficiency with the results obtained in our public or semi-public charitable organizations, where fifty, sixty and even more per cent of the contributions or appropriations goes into the maintenance of costly offices, clerical force and fat salaries. The Society's unit is the parochial Conference, composed of men actively and personally engaged in charitable work. In cities having several Conferences, the control of affairs relating to the general wel-

fare of the work is vested in a Particular Council made up of representatives of the city's various Conferences. Over the Particular Councils and isolated Conferences is a Central or Superior Council, whose jurisdiction embraces a more or less extended territory. Finally, over the entire Society, and acting as the bond of unity of the whole body, the Council General in Paris.

In a very few years Conferences were to be found flourishing in a large number of the cities, towns and villages of France. Gradually their fame spread to other countries. In 1853, when Ozanam died, twenty years after the inauguration of the Society, the "eight young fellows" had increased to two thousand in Paris alone, where in one year they visited five thousand poor families, or an average of twenty thousand individuals, one-quarter of the poor of the vast city. The Conferences in France numbered five hundred, and there were branches established in Italy, Ireland, England, Belgium, Holland, Spain, Turkey, far-off Palestine and farther-off America.

As was pointed out above, scarcely had twelve years elapsed since the foundation, when the Society was implanted in St. Louis. Two men, Father Ambrose Heim, and Hon. Judge Bryan Mullanphy, were particularly instrumental in the establishment of the St. Louis Conference. On the 27th of November, 1845, just a week after the organization, Bishop Peter Richard Kenrick by letter gave it his approval, and on December 11, application for aggregation to the Paris Society was forwarded, and passed upon favorably at the meeting of the Council General on February 2, 1846. President Gossin's letter, in date of February 10, announcing the good news, contained interesting items of information.⁹

We give fervent thanks to God, that He has permitted the humble family of St. Vincent de Paul thus to develop itself, even in the New World. Before He had inspired you, in the midst of the United States, to establish the Conference, upon whose aggregation we this day send forth our congratulations, from another point of your continent, from Mexico, the happiness was already vouchsafed to us of welcoming new Associates. Surely you will rejoice with us at such news.

Meanwhile also, fresh blessings have fallen upon the Society in

⁹ *History of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in St. Louis, Mo.* Publications of the St. Louis Particular Council, No. 1, p. 20.

Europe. On the one side, a few faithful and zealous Catholics have made an opening for the entrance of our Society into the midst of Protestant Geneva; on the other, we have penetrated to the very capital of Islamism, and raised our standard at Constantinople.

A few months later, on the 26th of May, President Gossin wrote again to Dr. M. L. Linton, President of the St. Louis Conference:¹⁰

Thanks to you and to your associates, the salutary example is given, and we already hope that this example will find many imitators. We have learned that in Texas (it was then the Republic of Texas) a Conference is already organized and the Bishop of New York, during his short stay with our brethren in England, and among us in Paris, took particular pains to inform himself concerning our organization, with the intention of establishing it in the Episcopal City of his Diocese. . . .

The untrammelled intercourse Catholics in the United States enjoy with one another, induces us to hope that it may be in your power to contribute to the propagation of our Society in Baltimore, Philadelphia and other places. Materials for Conferences can surely be found in other cities than yours, and we should be most happy to owe you a debt of gratitude for being instrumental in forming new Branches of the Vincentian Brotherhood. . . .

That the St. Louis Conference had anything to do with the establishment of the Society in the Eastern States, I am not prepared to contend. The New York Conference was organized in 1846 in the old Cathedral Parish of St. Patrick, shortly after the return of Bishop Hughes from Europe, and undoubtedly under his supervision. This foundation "was coincident with the period when famine, distress and discontent drove thither an unprecedented tide of impoverished Catholic immigration. Unprepared and unused to the strange conditions of a new country, a large number of these immigrants, unable to procure work, reduced to straitened circumstances, rapidly went to swell the ranks of poverty-stricken and unprovided. The situation at last became so critical that the Catholic laity of New York were most forcibly impressed with the absolute necessity of establishing some sort of relief agency to help cope with the difficulties. Thus it was that the efficiency of the methods employed by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul were brought into prominence, with the result that very shortly Conferences of the

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 21.

Society were organized in a large number of the parishes of New York."

Following is a list of various cities of the United States in the order of aggregation of their older Conferences during the first fifteen years.¹¹

St. Louis, Conference of the Cathedral.....	February 2, 1846
New York, Conference of St. Patrick.....	March 27, 1848
Lockport, N. Y.....	October 28, 1848
Buffalo, N. Y, Conference of the Cathedral.....	November 28, 1848
Utica, N. Y.....	September 17, 1849
Milwaukee, Wis., Conference of the Cathedral.....	March 25, 1850
New Orleans, La., Conference of St. Patrick.....	June 20, 1853
Brooklyn, N. Y., Conference of St. James.....	May 26, 1856
Seneca Falls, N. Y.....	January 25, 1858
Rochester, N. Y., Conference of St. Patrick.....	January 25, 1858
Philadelphia, Pa., Conference of St. Joseph.....	February 22, 1858
Albany, N. Y., Conference of the Immac. Conception...	July 12, 1858
Jersey City, N. J., Conference of St. Peter.....	July 12, 1858
St. Paul, Minn.....	October 4, 1858
Chicago, Ill.....	November 1, 1858
Cincinnati, O., Conference of St. Peter.....	January 3, 1859
Dubuque, Ia., Conference of St. Raphael.....	April 11, 1859
Newark, N. J.....	June 27, 1859
Washington, D. C.....	January 16, 1860
Louisville, Ky., Conference of the Cathedral.....	August 25, 1861

New England entered the ranks in 1862, when Archbishop Williams founded in Boston the Conference of the Parish of St. James. Whilst at the end of 1861 there were in the United States only 75 Conferences, there are now approximately 1,300, with an aggregate membership of more than 16,000 Vincen-tians, to whom should be added about 3,500 honorary members, and the same number of subscribers. At the National Confer-ence held in Boston, June 4-7, 1911, a scheme of much-needed reorganization of the Society in the United States was proposed for consideration. The plan was to entrust the general admin-istration of the Conferences in this country to a National Coun-cil; at the seat of each Archbishopric a Central Council would have jurisdiction over all the Particular Councils and isolated Conferences. Since November, 1915, the Society operated accord-

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, Publications, etc., No. 5, pp. 16-17.

ing to this new plan, with a National Council in Washington, D. C.¹²

I shall close this statistical part of my paper with the remark that today—or rather before the war, for later statistics are not available—the Society of St. Vincent de Paul is flourishing in every European country; branches are in existence in every state of North, Central and South America; there are some in China, India, Asiatic Turkey and Ceylon; others in Egypt, Natal and the Transvaal, and even the far-off Philippines and the islands of Australasia. Over 250,000 Catholic men are enrolled as active or honorary members under the banner of St. Vincent de Paul, and working faithfully along the lines laid down by Frederic Ozanam and his seven companions.¹³

That such a vast army of Catholic men, 23,000 of whom, here in our midst, are thus personally engaged with absolute disinterestedness and unobtrusiveness in mending the ills of modern society, is a spectacle that should indeed arrest the attention of every thoughtful student of Church History. Here is a tremendous force at work; and not the least remarkable feature of it

¹² "At the time of the organization of the Superior Council of the United States, in November, 1915, it was decided that the office of the Council should be in Washington, D. C., at the Catholic University; but due to lack of funds to meet the needs of establishing a headquarters at the University, the business of the Council has been transacted from the personal address of the Secretary, in New York City." (Letter of Mr. Edmond J. Butler, Secretary, to the writer.)

¹³ Since the writing of this paper, the canonical status of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul has been accurately defined by the S. Congregation of the Council (November 13, 1920) in the discussion of the doubt propounded by the Bishop of Corrientes, Argentine Republic. The conclusion of this Declaration reads as follows: "Therefore, the Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul are truly a *non-ecclesiastical* pious association, to which cannot be applied the canons of the Code which deal with such associations as, being erected by ecclesiastical authority, become thereby truly ecclesiastical. Hence it is scarcely possible to return to the question submitted an answer, either affirmative or negative (the question was: 'Whether, and to what extent the aforesaid Society of St. Vincent de Paul is subject to the jurisdiction of the Ordinary of the place, according to the prescriptions of the Code of Canon Law, Book II, Part 3, Titles xviii and xix?'): for, as has been stated, undoubtedly even non-ecclesiastical associations are under the *vigilance* of the Bishop, and it may even happen that the work undertaken by them may fall under the jurisdiction of the Bishop, as, for instance, the mode of imparting religious instruction, if they erect a school" (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, Vol. xiii, No. 4, March 11, 1921, pp. 135-141).

is its wonderful pliability and adaptability. Times change, and man changes with them; conditions likewise widely differ according to countries; still the Society's equipment and program fit all these diversities. The Rule states in no equivocal terms that "No work of charity should be regarded as foreign to the Society, although its special object is to visit poor families. Thus its members are expected to embrace every opportunity of affording consolation to the sick and the prisoners, of instructing poor, unprotected or imprisoned children, and of procuring the succors of religion for those who need them at the hour of death." Indeed take up at random a copy of the Annual Report of any of the Superior Councils, and at once you are amazed at the wonderful array of charitable activities therein portrayed. There is scarcely any conceivable form of charitable endeavor in which the Society is not busily engaged. Let me just cite a few headings at haphazard: Preventive charity; Preventing sickness—unsanitary homes and workshops; Preventing intemperance; Preventing ignorance; Visiting almshouses and hospitals; Securing employment for their inmates; Aid to tubercular patients in public sanitariums; Cooperation with other societies to secure work for the unemployed; Securing proper places of employment for boys and young men discharged from reformatories; Living Wage question; Catholic district nurses; Imparting the thrift habit; The laborer and his family; Tenement house conditions; Girls as wage earners; The dependent and delinquent boy; Distribution of literature; Poor immigrants; Foreign immigrants; Summer vacations for the poor children of tenement districts; Rest for poor, weak mothers and young women discharged from hospitals; Securing homes for the destitute, abandoned and neglected children, etc. What a measureless source of energy for social reconstruction of the right type have we not, therefore, in a society which is ready to grapple courageously and does grapple successfully with the thousand and one knotty problems involved in our modern social conditions!

Note, moreover, that it goes at their solution in the proper way, which consists not in preaching a social upheaval, or even, if there be any such thing, a social revolution along Christian principles; it takes our modern organism as it is, and applies its energies to the cure of the individual diseased cell. Its motto is little short of genial: Preserve the family; preserve the home.

To materially safeguard the home by helping its members tide over temporary difficulties and become self-dependent and self-reliant; to gently remove prejudice from its precincts and sow the seed of truth, of all truths, this is undoubtedly obscure, slow, patient and sometimes ungrateful work; but it is the only effectual way of repairing the widening breaches of the society of today, and preparing the better society of tomorrow. The St. Vincent de Paul Society at one time were looking after one-quarter of the poor of Paris: what would not have been the result had their membership been four times greater in the French capital?

Before the zeal of the Conference men in America lies a field as great as the country itself, all the more so that in the assistance given they profess to make no distinctions, save naturally those dictated by Christian prudence. Would to God, then, that their numbers among us be commensurate with this immense field. The Society counts here, all told, some 23,000 members, with a record of about 40,000 families assisted. Would it be a Utopian dream to wish that the membership were increased five-fold and more, and that no city parish, especially in industrial centers, be without its Conference?

The first Vincentians were University students, and their experienced adviser bade them turn to the profit of their *protégés* their knowledge of law, medicine, etc. As time rolled on, almost every walk of life was represented in the Society. Such is the case nowadays, and such it ought to be with increased numbers. All, besides being model Catholics, cheerful, sympathetic, friendly, should be well abreast of the times, fully conversant with every question of the day and capable to talk about them pertinently: only thus will they be able to dispense properly the alms of good advice, temporal and spiritual. This is, I suppose, what Holy Writ means by "him who *understandeth* concerning the needy and the poor."¹⁴ Nay, more, the many among the Conference men who are men of intellect and culture, bright-witted men of business, and foremost in the professions, must be ready to meet their intellectual and social responsibilities, and to wield their influence for the curing of all social ills. "Beware," warned excellently one of them, "lest our deeds of charity become only a shield for the injustice of others, as they will be

¹⁴ Ps. xl, 1.

if, when we are relieving distress which is caused by injustice, as indeed we often must, we do not at the same time exert ourselves to the uttermost to remove that injustice which we see and know to be a cause of poverty: otherwise our very charity may help to perpetuate social wrongs."

Patient, kind, forgetful of self, meek, cheerful and active as men inspired by Christian charity are, yet there is in the field of reconstruction white for the harvest much more work than that which the Conference men can touch. Of the possibility of co-operating with other agencies of social service, Catholic or unsectarian, private or public, municipal, State or national, I do not wish to say anything; this is a question for the Vincentians themselves to solve; and I know that in many quarters much consideration has been given by them to this question, and practical solutions inspired by the spirit of broadmindedness which breathes through the Vincentian Rule, have been reached. But what I have in view is, that in the visitation and relief of the poor in their homes, there are many things that men cannot do; there are conditions that they never know, because either it takes a woman's keen eye to detect them, or else they are confided only to the doctor or to a female confidante. Shall this vast portion of the work remain undone, for the reason that women cannot become either active or honorary members of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul? If it were so, then we should say that Catholic charity has lost her clearsightedness and has "fallen away." But it is not so. All Conference men are agreed that the help of the gentler sex is a necessity: if ladies are debarred from membership in the Society, they can be subscribers and benefactresses; they can be friendly visitors, and in this capacity render most valuable assistance. The desire has been strongly voiced that there should be a Ladies' Auxiliary wherever there is a Conference, and much has been done already to promote the institution of such Auxiliaries. May I suggest that the type of these Ladies' Auxiliaries has been realized for upwards of three hundred years in the Confraternities of the Ladies of Charity?¹⁵ Inaugurated by St. Vincent de Paul at Châtillon-les-Dombes in August, 1617, they were established, some twenty years later, in every parish of Paris and its

¹⁵ Cf. P. COSTE: *Saint Vincent de Paul et les Dames de la Charité*. Paris, 1917.

suburbs, and in many other places throughout the kingdom, even at the court itself. This is not the place to expatiate upon the services rendered by them in visiting the poor sick in their homes, or in the Paris Hôtel-Dieu, in looking after foundlings and—we almost seem to speak here of our own times, not of the seventeenth century—in rehabilitating the war-devastated regions of Lorraine, Picardy and Champagne, caring for their plague and famine-stricken populations, distributing among them immense stores of clothing, securing homes for the war orphans, and employment for young girls driven out of their deserted homes. I briefly mention this much merely to emphasize the analogy between the works of the St. Vincent de Paul Society and those of the Ladies of Charity. From this analogy naturally flows the conclusion, which the resemblance of their Rules would render yet more forcible, that in a cooperation of these two institutions, which both claim the name and patronage of the same “Father of the Poor,” we Catholics have a matchless agency of reconstruction. Women cannot be aggregated to the Conferences; men have no place in the Confraternities of Charity. So be it. But who will say that an *entente cordiale* is impossible between these two institutions? Such an *entente* has been effected in various places, to the entire satisfaction of all concerned, and, first of all, of the poor. *Ab actu ad posse valet consecutio.*

There are people, I know, who will sadly wag their heads on hearing me almost identify these two words: reconstruction and charity. To such people reconstruction and charity are as far distant from each other as the north pole is from the south pole. Of charity they will have none, either for themselves or for others, for charity, they claim, is debasing. Not so philanthropy, the scientific and intelligent aid to a fellow-man in need. It is useless to point out here that the charity at which they hurl their anathemas is but a distorted creation of their own fancy, caricatured charity. As a Vincentian, I think, once nicely remarked, “Charity has two eyes in her head as well as Philanthropy; and moreover, as every human agency, because human, is shortsighted, Charity has, to increase her power of vision, supernatural light.” Because we are followers of Christ, who is charity, and children of His Church, which is also charity, and because we are firmly propped by history’s experience, we say confidently, adapting the words of the Wise Man: “What is it

that shall be? the same thing that hath been. What is it that shall be done? the same thing that hath been done.”¹⁶ In the work of reconstruction which lies before us, by all means let us have charity, plenty of it: for charity it is, and SHE ALONE, that “buildeth up.”¹⁷

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¹⁶ Eccl., i, 9.

¹⁷ I Cor., viii, 1.